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THE ENVY OF GOD IN THE PARADISE STORY
ACCORDING TO THE GREEK *LIFE OF ADAM AND EVE*

Lautaro Roig Lanzillotta

Anyone acquainted with the factors and actors of envy, and who has been forced by circumstances to reflect on its origin, character, and development, sooner or later unavoidably realises or intuits that this passion has a deeper dimension and significance that escapes a first analysis. The apparent triangular structure of envy, comprising the envied spiritual or material goods, the envious person, and the person who is the target of the envy, is simply not enough to explain the complex set of feelings and relations triggered by this emotion. This is obvious in the fact that envy may arise not only in the individual who does not possess a given good and desires to have it, but also in he who possesses it and attempts by all means to prevent others from having it.

It thus seems that there are other less visible factors that are likely to explain its appearance in human relations. At any rate, there are certain necessary conditions that must concur in order for envy to appear. These are, for example, the existence of a comparative frame in which two individuals may establish themselves as terms of a comparison¹ in their quest for goods, a value scale that determines an individual's higher or lower value according to his ability to acquire status tokens, and, of course, the symbolic value of objects insofar as they provide the individual with an idea of his personal value.²

In this homage to Professor Florentino García Martínez, I would like to approach this complex conceptual world through the motif of

¹ The comparative attitude of individuals as well as the comparative frame in which they are involved has always been envisaged as triggering envy. According to Spinoza, *Ethica* III, prop XXIII, the former is inherent to humans beings (*ex eodem natura proprietate*). Also for D. Hume, *A Treatise on Human Nature* II, part. II, sect. VII, the value we give to reality depends more on comparison than on the intrinsic value of things. See furthermore I. Kant, *Metaphysik der Sitten* II, 2, 1, 36 and L. Festinger, "A Theory of Social Comparison Process," *Human Relations* (1954): 114–40.

² For the importance of the symbolic value of goods, see W. McDougal *apud* H. Sullivan, *Clinical Studies of Psychiatry* (New York: Norton, 1954), 128–29. P. Salovey and A.J. Rothman, "Envy and Jealousy: Self and Society," in *The Psychology of Jealousy and Envy* (ed. P. Salovey; New York: Guilford, 1991), 271–86 (284).

the envy of God developed in chapters XV to XVIII of the Greek *Life of Adam and Eve* (*LAE*).³ In order to do so, I shall first focus on this *passus*. I shall then proceed to compare it with the model the author is paraphrasing (Gen 2:16–17 and 3:1–7) in order to see whether the Bible story *mutatis mutandis* might have provided him with the elements of his interpretation or whether one should surmise the influence of external factors, such as the existence of discussions or commentaries that intended to cast some light upon divine motivation. I shall finally compare it with the Gnostic appropriation and reinterpretation of a motif that suited their *Weltanschauung* very well.

1. THE ENVY OF GOD IN THE GREEK LIFE OF ADAM AND EVE

In chapter 15 of *LAE*, Adam and Eve decide to call their children together in order to tell them about the transgression they committed in the past. Once they have all arrived, Eve narrates how the Enemy deceived them (110–112). She begins by relating that God had placed them in paradise, allotting each of them the surveillance of a different part of the Garden (113–118). But the devil enrolls the serpent with a view to getting the first couple thrown out of Paradise (118–127). By means of the serpent, the devil manages to get into conversation with Eve (133ff.) in order to surreptitiously instil in her an interpretation of God's motivation and an attitude toward His commandments (142–151) that will result in the first couple's exile from the Garden of Eden (154–226).

It will be clear from the beginning that in this dialogue, which is a clear amplification and a paraphrase of Gen 2:16–17 and 3:1–7, there are no elements alien to the Old Testament story (below). God's prohibition to eat from the tree in the middle of Paradise is the same, the devil's temptation in order that Eve may obviate the prohibition is the same, and the results of the transgression are also the same. The serpent/devil slightly alters the interpersonal parameters of the Genesis story, and the resulting new evaluative frame allows a complete transformation of the relationship between the human and divine spheres.

At any rate, the devil begins the conversation by asking Eve what she is doing in Paradise and she naively answers that God put them

³ For the Greek text I use the edition by J. Tromp, *The Life of Adam and Eve in Greek: A Critical Edition* (PVTG 6; Leiden: Brill, 2005).

there to watch over it and to eat from it (132–136). The devil asks then if they may eat from *every* tree in the Garden, and Eve answers that they may eat from *all* the trees *except* from the one in the middle of Paradise (139–141): καὶ γὰρ εἶπον· ναί, ἀπὸ πάντων ἐσθίομεν, παρὲξ ἑνὸς μόνου ὃ ἐστὶν μέσον τοῦ παραδείσου, περὶ οὗ ἐνετείλατο ἡμῖν ὁ θεὸς μὴ ἐσθίειν ἐξ αὐτοῦ, ἐπεὶ θανάτῳ ἀποθανεῖσθε.

It is interesting to note that God's menace (θανάτῳ ἀποθανεῖσθε) implies that the first couple already possessed one of the divine attributes, i.e. not being liable to death.⁴ The snake, however, obviates this important issue, and instead of focusing on what they do have, namely immortality, it focuses on what they do not. By making her conscious of what she lacks, the snake automatically introduces Eve to the fictitious evaluative frame that will result in her and her man's exile from Paradise (142–151):

τότε λέγει μοι ὁ ὄφις· ζῇ ὁ θεός, ὅτι λυποῦμαι περὶ ὑμῶν. οὐ γὰρ θέλω ὑμᾶς ἀγνοεῖν. δεῦρο οὖν καὶ φάγε καὶ νόησον τὴν τιμὴν τοῦ ξύλου. ² ἐγὼ εἶπον αὐτῷ· φοβοῦμαι μήποτε ὀργισθῇ μοι ὁ θεὸς καθὼς εἶπεν ἡμῖν. ³ καὶ λέγει μοι· μὴ φοβοῦ. ἅμα γὰρ φάγῃς, ἀνοιχθήσονται σου οἱ ὀφθαλμοί, καὶ ἔσσεσθε ὡς θεοὶ γινώσκοντες τί ἀγαθὸν καὶ τί πονηρόν. τοῦτο δὲ γινώσκων ὁ θεὸς ὅτι ἔσσεσθε ὅμοιοι αὐτοῦ, ἐφθόνησεν ὑμῖν καὶ εἶπεν οὐ φάγεσθε ἐξ αὐτοῦ. ⁵ σὺ δὲ πρόσχες τῷ φυτῷ καὶ ὄψει δόξαν μεγάλην.

There are many interesting aspects in this text, but we shall focus on the most relevant for our present purpose. One of them is the already mentioned omission of any reference to the impending death of the first couple should they transgress the prohibition. By obviating this, the snake is able to depict knowledge as the most relevant aspect of the divine. The section abounds in implicit and explicit references to an all-embracing kind of knowledge (142–143: οὐ...ἀγνοεῖν; 143: νόησον; 147–148: ἀνοιχθήσονται σου οἱ ὀφθαλμοί; 148: γινώσκοντες; 149: γινώσκων). It should be noted, however, that this knowledge, if deprived of eternity, amounts to nothing or, at any rate, not to the kind of knowledge Eve strives for. Her deception lies precisely in the fact that Eve, by acquiring knowledge, will be deprived of eternal life, as a result of which the acquired knowledge—insofar as it is no increase in insight in what was, what is, and will be—will just be a pale reflection of divine knowledge. Incidentally, passing though it might be, this reference in *LAE* already indicates that we are no longer dealing with the Old

⁴ Cf., however, Gen 3:22; but see *Ps.-Clem. Homil.* 16.6.3–4.

Testament conception of divinity mainly focused on “divine identity,” as R. Bauckham suggested,⁵ but with an idea of God that denotes the influence of Greek philosophical thought on the issue, which was more interested in the description of His divine attributes.

The most important issue in the section, however, is the stratagem by means of which the serpent convinces Eve to eat from the tree in the middle of Paradise. After making Eve aware of what she lacks, the devil completes the circle of his argument by pointing to God not only as the possessor of her desired good, but also as responsible for her lacking it: it is an intentional grudge by the divinity that determines Eve’s lack. In the devil’s words, God’s envy is the reason behind the prohibition to eat from the tree, insofar as he intended to prevent Adam and Eve from acquiring the status token that would make them gods.

The scenario of envy is now complete. In the first place we have Eve’s envy: after realising what she lacks, Eve peremptorily needs to achieve what she might have but has not. This need is increased after she hears that her lack is due to an intentional grudge by one who has it, i.e. God. Eve’s envy can then be described as *ascendant envy*. On the other hand, we have God’s envy. The devil affirms that God’s prohibition is based on his own interest, namely that by begrudging the first couple the knowledge, he actually intends to preserve for himself that which determines his superiority. God’s envy can be described as *descendant envy*.⁶

In order for this complex evaluative universe to appear, however, there are also certain factors required. I shall now mention just two of them. In the first place, one needs the existence of a comparative frame in which God and the first couple may represent the two terms of a value comparison. In Eve’s case, however fictitious her impression might be, she must in one way or another believe that she has *almost* the same status as God, since it is only knowledge that seems to separate her from God’s loftiness. The same applies to God’s envy, since in the

⁵ R. Bauckham, *God Crucified: Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament* (The Didsbury Lectures, 1996. Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998), 8–9.

⁶ I cannot therefore agree with the interpretation of the *passus* by W.C. van Unnik, “Der Neid in der Paradiesgeschichte nach einigen gnostischen Texten,” in *Essays on the Nag Hammadi Texts in Honour of Alexander Böhl* (ed. M. Krause; NHS 3; Leiden: Brill, 1972), 120–32. The author classes it among the examples of descendant envy, namely, as an example, exclusively, of God’s envy towards man. But our analysis reveals that the passage is much more complex than van Unnik is ready to admit, since placing God and Eve in the same comparative frame includes both directions of envy. On the second variety, see next note.

serpent's opinion it is a grudge on the part of the divinity that caused the prohibition, and this kind of descendant envy intends to prevent those who are inferior but rather close to the superior individual from reducing the distance that separates them.⁷

Secondly, we need the development of the status tokens that represent the focus of both envious attitudes. In our text these are both eternity and knowledge, insofar as they determine, as already stated, divine status.

Consequently, we may suggest that, however disturbing the devil's accusation against God might be, the focus of our passage is not so much on God's envy as on Eve's envy. The devil's stratagem is intended to seduce or deceive Eve, and he achieves this by fictitiously transposing her into an evaluative frame in which she has a *right* to have what God has. By pointing to what she lacks and by mentioning God's envy, the serpent actually triggers Eve's own envy. The blind quest for what she apparently lacks prevents Eve from realising that, like the dog in Aesop's fable, if she goes after what she does not have, she will even lose what she has.⁸

The end of the story is well known: Eve yields to her desire for knowledge and eats from the tree, then gives it to her husband as well, and, as a result, both of them are expelled from the Garden of Eden. From now on they will be subject to the chains of mundane existence.

2. THE ALLEGED EXTERNAL INFLUENCES OF THIS INTERPRETATION OF GEN 2:16–17 AND 3:4–5

In a rather confusing article on the motif of envy in the Paradise story, W.C. van Unnik dealt with our section of *LAE* together with other examples from the Nag Hammadi texts.⁹ Following with hesitation

⁷ See H. Schoeck, *Der Neid und die Gesellschaft* (Freiburg: Herder, 1971).

⁸ See Babrius, "canis per fluvium carnem ferens."

⁹ Van Unnik, "Der Neid," 120–32. I refer to the article as confusing, because the author not only mixes rather different texts with one another and the different types of envy included in them, but also does not attempt a systematic analysis of the quoted passages in order to achieve a consistent explanation. He first deals with the envy of the archons towards men in the *Titellose Schrift* 166–167 [*OrigWorld* (NHC II,5) 118.25–119.6] and in the *Hypostasis of the Archons* 137–138 [89.31–90.19], then proceeds to describe two general sorts of envy, i.e. ascendant and descendant, in order to jump afterwards to rather different envy examples (in this case Jaldabaoth's envy against Sabaoth in *Titellose Schrift* 154 [*OrigWorld* (NHC II,5) 106.19–30] and *Hypostasis of the Archons* 144

R.M. Grant,¹⁰ who in turn followed A. von Harnack,¹¹ van Unnik surmised that the origin of this paraphrase might be a Marcionite attribution of envy to the God of the Old Testament.¹² As support for this suggestion, he quotes texts from Theophilus and Irenaeus.¹³ As we shall see, however, there are some problems with this explanation.

To begin with, as already proposed, if we exclude the motif of envy, the passage in *LAE* does not add relevant new elements to its Biblical model. An important argument to disprove the alleged Marcionite origin of the motif is the absolute lack of a divine dichotomy, either between the righteous and the good God, or between the highest God and the creator.

Besides, it is not in a general argument by the writer that the text presses charges of envy against God. Rather, it is the devil—a clear antagonist whom the text depicts as a deceiver acting out of malice and hatred against God and the first couple—who issues the accusation. This argument seems to be supported by the fact that, differently than in Gnostic texts that rewrite the Paradise story,¹⁴ the serpent is clearly said to “deceive” Eve (*LAE* 111–112; 124–123).

Last but not least, the transgression does not report any good for the first couple, as is the case in the Gnostic texts that endorse the theory of divine envy as a background for the prohibition. As in the Biblical story, Eve not only does not achieve what she strives for, but she is also expelled together with Adam from Paradise, as a punishment for her disobedience.

[96.3–15]. He then brings in Aristotle’s *Rhetorica* in order to affirm afterwards that the previous examples are in fact diverse. The most important problem, however, is that the passage from *LAE* is confusingly included as if the reference to God’s envy were a general argument by the writer. Rather, on the contrary, the charges of envy are issued by the devil in the form of the serpent in a way that closely resembles the Biblical story.

¹⁰ R.M. Grant, *Theophilus of Antioch Ad Autolycum* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 67.

¹¹ A. von Harnack, *Marcion: das Evangelium vom fremden Gott* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1924), 414–15, who refers to Ambrosius, *De Paradiso* 6.30.

¹² Van Unnik, “Der Neid,” 125–26.

¹³ Theophilus, *Ad Autolycum* II 25, διὸ οὐχ ὡς φθονῶν αὐτῷ ὁ θεός, ὡς οἴονται τινες, ἐκέλευσεν μὴ ἐσθίειν ἀπὸ τῆς γνώσεως; Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.23.6, *Quampropter et eicit eum de Paradiso et a ligno vitae longe transtulit, non invidens ei lignum vitae, quemadmodum audent quidam dicere, sed miserans eius.*

¹⁴ G.P. Luttikhuisen, *Gnostic Revisions of Genesis Stories and Early Jesus Traditions* (NHMS 58; Leiden: Brill, 2005), 76 points out that a significant difference between the Biblical story and its Gnostic revisions lies in the fact that the latter do not affirm, as the former does, that the serpent deluded or seduced Eve.

It seems obvious, consequently, that the author does not endorse this view. On the contrary, he puts the accusation in the mouth of the serpent, as a paraphrasing and amplifying version of the Genesis story that makes explicit what a reader of the Hellenistic period might interpret as implicit in the text. After all, according to Wisdom, the devil was held responsible for introducing envy to the world.¹⁵

This becomes clear by closely comparing *LAE* to its Biblical model. The Genesis story is well known, but I include it in order to facilitate the comparison of both passages. The first relevant section is Gen 2:16–17, in which God commands Adam not to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil:

καὶ ἐνετείλατο κύριος ὁ θεὸς τῷ Ἀδὰμ λέγων ἀπὸ παντὸς ξύλου τοῦ ἐν τῷ παραδείσῳ βρώσει φάγη ¹⁷ ἀπὸ δὲ τοῦ ξύλου τοῦ γινώσκειν καλὸν καὶ πονηρὸν οὐ φάγεσθε ἅπ' αὐτοῦ ἥ δ' ἂν ἡμέρα φάγητε ἅπ' αὐτοῦ θανάτῳ ἀποθανεῖσθε.

The other passage is Gen 3:2–7, in which the actual conversation between the snake and Eve takes place:

καὶ εἶπεν ἡ γυνὴ τῷ ὄφει ἀπὸ καρποῦ ξύλου τοῦ παραδείσου φαγόμεθα ³ ἀπὸ δὲ καρποῦ τοῦ ξύλου ὃ ἐστὶν ἐν μέσῳ τοῦ παραδείσου εἶπεν ὁ θεὸς οὐ φάγεσθε ἅπ' αὐτοῦ οὐδὲ μὴ ἄψησθε αὐτοῦ ἵνα μὴ ἀποθάνητε ⁴ καὶ εἶπεν ὁ ὄφις τῇ γυναικὶ οὐ θανάτῳ ἀποθανεῖσθε ⁵ ἥδει γὰρ ὁ θεὸς ὅτι ἐν ἡμῖν ἂν ἡμέρα φάγητε ἅπ' αὐτοῦ διανοιχθήσονται ὕμῶν οἱ ὀφθαλμοὶ καὶ ἔσεσθε ὡς θεοὶ γινώσκοντες καλὸν καὶ πονηρὸν.

It is not difficult to see that *LAE* actually conflates both sections of Genesis, since Eve declares that they might not eat from the “tree in the middle of Paradise,” as in Gen 3:3, and, should they do so, the result will be that “they will surely die,” as in Gen 2:17 (θανάτῳ ἀποθανεῖσθε). However, *LAE* nevertheless preserves all the important details without changing the basic story.

As a matter of fact, one might, at the most, accuse *LAE*'s devil of overinterpreting the Genesis sentence: ἥδει γὰρ ὁ θεὸς ὅτι ἐν ἡμῖν ἂν ἡμέρα φάγητε ἅπ' αὐτοῦ διανοιχθήσονται ὕμῶν οἱ ὀφθαλμοὶ καὶ ἔσεσθε ὡς θεοὶ γινώσκοντες καλὸν καὶ πονηρὸν. But how should this sentence actually be explained? How should we understand the devil's assertion in the Biblical passage that the prohibition not to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil is due to the fact that “God knows that

¹⁵ Wis 2:24, φθόνῳ δὲ διαβόλου θάνατος εἰσῆλθεν εἰς τὸν κόσμον.

on the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like gods, knowing good and evil.”

The first possible explanation could be that the serpent of the Genesis story simply intended to underline the inherent limits of the human condition, by establishing a clear-cut difference between the divine and human spheres—Adam and Eve possess eternal life but not unlimited knowledge. In doing so, the serpent’s intention would be simply tempting Eve by establishing, first, the difference between the human and divine spheres in order to point immediately afterwards to that which *apparently* could blur these borders. From this perspective the theme of the Genesis story would be Eve’s *hybris*, an arrogant attitude on her side that would lead her to transgress the prohibition in order to achieve divine status. This explanation implies a culture in which the world of the gods and that of human beings is unbridgeable, an archaic religious conscience, of which Greek mythology also provides numerous examples and according to which any human attempt to trespass the inherent limits results in his ruin.¹⁶

However, that the serpent of the Biblical passage had God’s envy in mind as a reason for the prohibition of course remains a possibility. The Biblical passage is ambiguous enough not to allow such a clear-cut distinction between the divine and human spheres, at least not at the moment that the whole Paradise story takes place: Adam and Eve are the first humans, but they live in Paradise and possess eternal life. Even though they are creatures of God, and therefore inferior to him, in one possible interpretation, they nonetheless possess certain divine attributes that bring them close to God. It is from this perspective that envy as a background for God’s motivation becomes a possible interpretation.

I think it is precisely in this context that we have to place *LAE*’s version of the serpent’s words, since it deliberately blurs the borders between the divine and human spheres and, by placing God and men side by side, introduces them in a comparative frame. The key of the devil’s

¹⁶ See, for example, the famous cases of Tantalus and Bellerophontes, which perfectly exemplify the loss of human measure (κόρος), the arrogant attitude that follows it (the ὕβρις ἀτάσθαλον), and the punishment of the gods it necessarily attracts, a sort of blindness (ἄτη), which results in their ruin. Both mythological heroes were favoured by the gods with a steady well-being (the former shared the table with them and the latter was supported in all his affairs), as a result of which they thought they were as infallible as the gods. In the case of Bellerophontes, his attempt to blur the borders between the divine and human spheres is properly punished in way that clearly reaffirms them: angry with him when he tried to reach the Olympus on his winged horse Pegasus, Zeus simply sent an insignificant mosquito to face him.

interpretation lies in the meaning he gives to the section: ἔσεσθε ὡς θεοί. While the Biblical passage depicts divine *status*, to which eternity and knowledge belong, namely “you will become gods,” in *LAE* the serpent interprets the expression as “to be *like* God is.” With this in mind, the devil introduces an explicit explanation (149–150): τοῦτο δὲ γινώσκων ὁ θεὸς ὅτι ἔσεσθε ὅμοιοι αὐτοῦ, ἐφθόνησεν ὑμῖν κτλ. (“As God knew that you would become like him, he envied you, etc.”). By referring to God’s envious grudge and thus implying the possibility of Eve’s existential promotion, the serpent triggers her envy.

LAE’s amplification and exegetical sentence clearly introduces an interpretation of the Biblical passage, but do we need to suppose an external source to explain this paraphrase? In point of fact, *LAE*’s paraphrase looks more like a gloss on the text, as a commentary that intended to clarify the expression ὡς θεοί, rather than a radical interpretation of the Biblical passage.

In a last analysis, the devil’s intention in Genesis is as denigratory as in *LAE*. Independently of the explanation one gives to the serpent’s assertion, either as an authoritative denial or as an envious grudge, the fact remains that it seduces Eve who, the victim of *hybris* or of envy, yields to her desire to achieve that which might make her a god or like the gods.

The passages by Theophilus and Irenaeus may or may not reflect the “Meinung bestimmter Lehrer,”¹⁷ as van Unnik affirms, but in my view, what they do not necessarily echo is a Gnostic or pre-Gnostic appropriation and reinterpretation of the Paradise story. They might simply testify to explanatory attempts concerning what the serpent was actually asserting in the Genesis account.

3. THE ENVY OF THE DEMIURGE ACCORDING TO SOME GNOSTIC TEXTS

In the Gnostic retelling of the Genesis story one finds a wholly different conceptual world. For the first time one can speak of a *revision* in the strict sense of the word, since the story is included in a completely new narrative frame. The scene becomes an essential episode both in the history of human devaluation—from the heights of transcendence to the lowest abode of the sublunar world—and in the process of the

¹⁷ Van Unnik, “Der Neid,” 125–26.

recovery of the primal condition. Consequently, Gnostic texts including a rewriting of the story completely alter the setting, the actors, their identities, interpersonal relations, and the reasons that determine human and divine motivation.¹⁸

To begin with, all the Nag Hammadi texts dealing with the passage endorse the second of the possible interpretations (above) of God's prohibition, namely, they recognise the background of a grudging envious attitude towards the first humans. An obvious corollary of this interpretation is that, according to the Gnostics, the Paradise story could not be describing the actions of the *real* God.¹⁹ Behind this view we may have the influence of Plato's assertion that God is free of envy in *Phaedrus* and *Timaeus*,²⁰ or, even more importantly, Plato's conception of (descendant) envy as the most serious obstacle to the development and transmission of virtue, which can be found in the *Laws* and several other places.²¹ However, an interesting passage from the first book of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* might provide an even more suitable parallel for the theme we are dealing with. In discussing the question whether or not knowledge about greater matters is beyond human power—namely knowledge about the phenomena of the moon, the sun, and the stars, and about the genesis of the universe—the Philosopher categorically denies the possibility of an envious divinity who withholds knowledge from humans:

¹⁸ As Luttikhuisen, *Gnostic Revisions*, 75, has pointed out, the *Testimony of Truth*, for example, “does not entirely reject the biblical Paradise story. In fact, the actual events are not doubted. The controversy concerns the identity of the actors appearing in the story (the creator, the serpent and the first human beings) and the real meaning of what was said and what was done.”

¹⁹ See, for example, the conclusion to *Testim. Truth*'s retelling of the Paradise Story (NHC IX,3; 48.1–4): “What sort of God is this? First [he] was envious of Adam that he should eat from the tree of knowledge. And secondly he said, ‘Adam where are you?’ So, God did not have foreknowledge? ... What sort of God is this? Indeed, great is the blindness of those who read (this) and have not recognized him!”

²⁰ Plato, *Phdr.* 247 A 7, φθόνος γὰρ ἔξω θείου χοροῦ ἵσταται; *Tim.* 29E 1–2, ἀγαθὸς ἦν, ἀγαθὸν δὲ οὐδεὶς περὶ οὐδενὸς οὐδέποτε ἐγγίγνεται φθόνος.

²¹ Plato, *Laws* 730E–731A 2 generally deals with those cases in which descendant envy is an obstacle for a good functioning of the polis: the first place in honour corresponds to him, who having achieved *sophrosyne* and *phronesis* does not impede others from achieving it, but rather actively helps them to do so. In the lowest place of social esteem, we find the envious individual who has the spiritual goods and intentionally prevents others from reaching them; see also *Prot.* 327A 4–327B 6, where the unenvious transmission of *arete* and justice is also the basis of a well-functioning polis. In *Menex.* 93C 6–9, envy is an obstacle to the transmission of *arete* from parents to children (cf. *Hipp. Maj.* 283E 6 and Pseudo-Plato, *De virtute*). See L. Roig Lanzillotta, *La envidia en el pensamiento griego: Desde la época arcaica al helenismo* (Diss., Univ. Complutense, 1997), 419–24.

If, then, there is something in what the poets say, and jealousy is natural to the divine power, it would probably occur in this case above all, and all who excelled in this knowledge would be unfortunate. But the divine power cannot be jealous (nay, according to the proverb, “bards tell a lie”), nor should any other science be thought more honourable than one of this sort.²²

According to the Gnostic view, consequently, the Paradise story depicts the attempts by the lower Demiurge (on occasion, by the rulers of the material world)²³ to prevent humans from coming to know themselves and their real nature.²⁴ There are several texts that include a revision of the Genesis story.²⁵ Obviating now the particular differences, we may generally sketch the rewriting as follows.

After the Demiurge (or the rulers) has involuntarily insufflated the Mother’s light power in Adam, the first man is cast down by the creator to the lowest regions of matter, lest he come to know his true superior nature.

As could be expected, however, the good and higher God intervenes in order that humans may come to know their true belonging and may begin their way back to their original abode. With this in mind, he sends a helper to assist them,²⁶ which is normally the serpent²⁷ but, on occasion, can also be Christ himself²⁸ or even an eagle sitting on the tree—which is actually Epinoia, the Light Reflection.²⁹

²² Aristotle, *Metaph.* 982 B 32–983 A 5. In this trend, see *Gos. Truth* (NHC II,3) 18.34–19.10; *Tri. Trac.* (NHC I,5) 62.20–33; *Interpr. Know.* (NHC XI,1) 15.18–21.

²³ *Ap. John* (NHC II,1) 22.3–7; BG 57.8–18.

²⁴ See *Testim. Truth* (NHC IX,3) 47.28–30; 48.8–13; *Hyp. Arch.* (NHC II,4) 90.6–10; *Orig. World* (NHC II,5) 119.5

²⁵ So, for example, *Ap. John* (NHX II,1) 21.16–22.15; *Testim. Truth* (NHC IX,3) 47.14–48.13; *Hyp. Arch.* (NHC II,4) 89.31–90.19; *Orig. World* (NHC II,5) 118.16–119.18; cf. *Gos. Truth.* (NHC I,3) 18.24–29.

²⁶ *Ap. John* (NHC II) 20.9–19 (BG 52.17–53.10), “The Blessed Father had mercy on the power of the Mother which had been drawn out of the first ruler... And through his beneficent Spirit and his great mercy, he sent a helper to Adam.”

²⁷ *Hyp. Arch.* (NHC II,4) 90.6, 31. In this text, however, the instructor is actually the female spiritual principle that comes in the snake and teaches them (see 89.31–32); *Orig. World* (NHC II,5) 119.25–27.

²⁸ *Ap. John* (NHC II,1) 22.9. See also *Gos. Truth* (NHC I,3) 18.24–29, which, in an allusion to Gen 3:3, says that Christ was nailed on the cross and “became the fruit of knowledge of the Father. It did not, however, cause destruction because it was eaten, but to those who ate it, it gave (cause) to become glad in the discovery.”

²⁹ *Ap. John* (BG 60.19–61.7). On the motif of the eagle, see I. Czachesz, “The Eagle on the Tree: A Homeric Motif in Jewish and Christian Literature,” in *Jerusalem, Alexandria, Rome: Studies in Ancient Cultural Interaction in Honour of A. Hilhorst* (ed. F. García Martínez and G.P. Luttikhuisen; JSJSup 82; Leiden: Brill, 2003), 87–106.

It is in this context that the Paradise scene is framed. Adam and Eve have received the commandment not to eat from the tree of knowledge not from God but from the Demiurge, and this with a view to keeping them ignorant of their superior condition. Here we find the first relevant transformation: the actors of the story have been changed. It is not the higher God who is envious, but the lower one. Aware of the latter's stratagem, the higher divinity intervenes to frustrate his intentions, since he is in fact willing humans to achieve knowledge. As the *Gospel of Truth* asserts, God does not withhold knowledge from humans, but temporarily retains their perfection "granting it to them as a return to him and a perfect and unitary knowledge."³⁰

As an emissary of the supreme God, the serpent is the "instructor" who will inform Eve about the real reason of the prohibition and encourage her to eat from the tree of knowledge so that her eyes might be opened. Its role, consequently, is also reversed: from being the seducer (in Genesis) or, as a means for the devil, the introducer of envy to the world (*LAE*), it becomes now the benefactor of humanity. In accordance with its positive role in the story, its description acquires a more favourable character. As G.P. Luttikhuizen has pointed out, the *Testimony of Truth* notably upgrades the serpent, which no longer belongs to the earth but to Paradise and is described as an "animal" instead of as a "beast."³¹

The same transformation applies, of course, to the results of the transgression committed by the first humans. Once they eat from the tree, the first thing Adam and Eve become aware of is their imperfection, due to their lack of *gnosis*. The transgression is, consequently, no longer the beginning of the fall, but rather the beginning of the recovery of their lost condition, insofar as awareness of one's own imperfection is a precondition for reaching perfection.³² It is this knowledge that will start the gradual process of self-knowledge that in its turn will allow the ascent and recovery of their primal condition.

As an example of the previous generalising sketch of the Gnostic rewriting of the Paradise story, it will suffice now to present one of the versions. It is perhaps the *Hypostasis of the Archons* that includes the most compact account of the story:

³⁰ See *Gos. Truth* (NHC II,3) 18.34–19.10.

³¹ See Luttikhuizen, *Gnostic Revision*, 76–77.

³² See *Gos. Truth* (NHC I,3) 21.14–25.

Then the female spiritual principle came in the snake, the instructor, and it taught them, saying, "What did he say to you? Was it, 'From every tree in the garden shall you eat; yet—from the tree of recognizing evil and good do not eat?'"

The carnal woman said, "Not only did he say 'Do not eat,' but even 'Do not touch it; for the day you eat from it, with death you are going to die.'"³³

The introductory section already reveals important differences: to begin with, the snake remains an implement of a higher instance, but in this case is not, as in *LAE*, the devil that speaks through it, but the female spiritual principle. The revaluation of the snake is clear not only in its description as "the instructor," but also in the fact that it is acquainted with the words the Demiurge issued to Eve. The divergences increase as the text goes on:

And the snake, the instructor, said, "With death you shall not die; for it was out of jealousy that he said this to you. Rather your eyes shall open and you shall come to be like gods, recognizing evil and good." And the female spiritual principle was taken away from the snake.

It is interesting to note that in the present passage, even though clearly attributing envy to the Demiurge, there is no interest in explaining the reason behind it. Obviating every attempt to search for a logical explanation, the Gnostic rewriting simply explains the prohibition, since the transformation of the narrative frame and actors of the story is explicit enough. "And the carnal woman took from the tree and ate; and she gave to her husband as well as herself . . . And their imperfection became apparent in their lack of acquaintance; and they recognized that they were naked of the spiritual element."

The outcome of the transgression is rather different as well. The first thing they realise is their imperfection, namely their lack of acquaintance, and then they notice that they are naked *of the spiritual element*.

CONCLUSIONS

I think that the above analysis sufficiently demonstrates that the interpretation of the Paradise story provided by the *LAE* does not introduce important changes in its Biblical model. Admittedly, the motif of God's

³³ *Hyp. Arch.* (NHC II,4) 89.31–90.5.

envy as a background to his prohibition to Adam and Eve to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil does not appear in the words of the snake of Genesis and represents a clear addition to the text. However, given the two possible interpretations of the snake's accusation, namely God's authoritative denying or envious grudge, *LAE* made use of the latter both because it ideally suited the conceptual context created by Wisdom's assertion that death came into the world through the devil's envy, and because Eve's envy was more appealing to a Hellenistic reader than *hybris* as a reason for her transgression.

Consequently, there is nothing in *LAE*'s version of the story that might allow us to discover behind it the likely, but thus far unproved, attribution of envy to the God of the Old Testament by Marcionites.

Gnostic revisions of the Paradise story, however, present a completely different world of ideas. The appropriation of the motif of envy as a background for God's prohibition, which the Gnostic texts dealt with freely endorse, provided them with a convenient support for their own views. On the one hand, it gave them the opportunity to explain both the true cause of human degradation and the need for self-knowledge in order to retrace the steps of devaluation. On the other, the Paradise story offered a perfect opportunity to show on the basis of Genesis itself that the God of the Old Testament could hardly be the loving and merciful God of their creed. This envious God simply did not meet the high requirements of a concept of divinity that was already under the influence of the Platonic-Peripatetic theology.